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RESEARCH REPORT

PILOT RETENTION AND AIR FORCE LEADERSHIP

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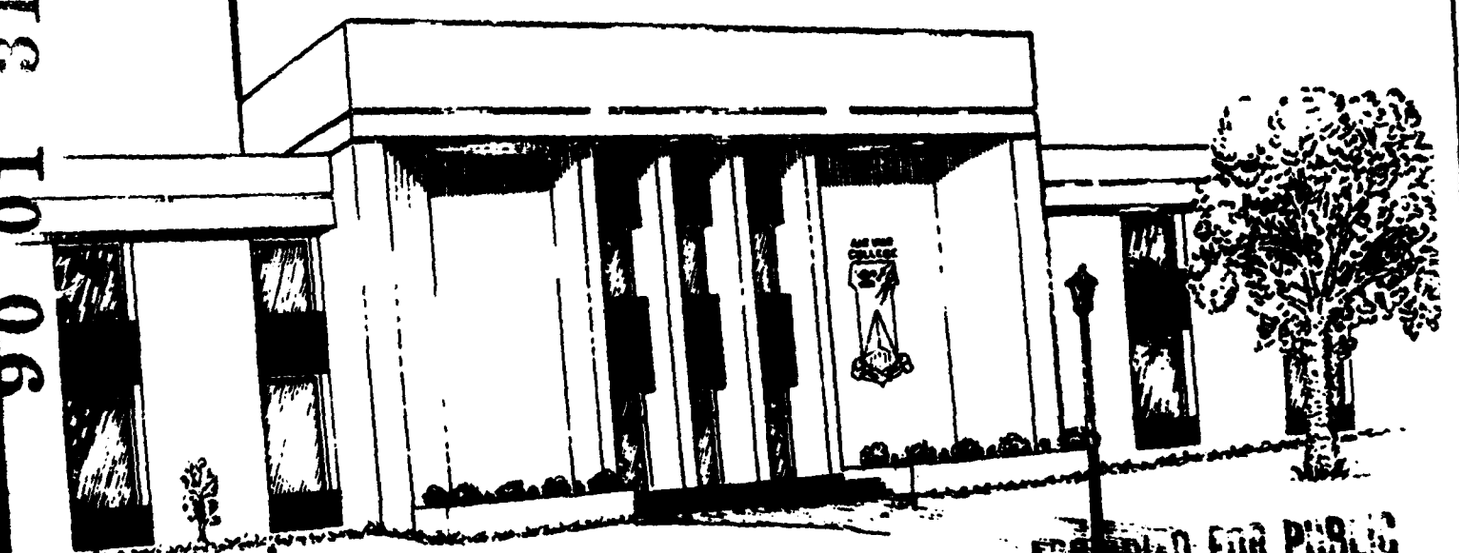

AIR UNIVERSITY
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AIR WAR COLLEGE

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PILOT RETENTION AND AIR FORCE LEADERSHIP

by

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A DEFENSE ANALYTICAL STUDY SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM

REQUIREMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TITLE: Pilot Retention and Air Force Leadership

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A comparison of the cost of a warplane with the cost of an operational pilot introduces a discussion on the important national investment which is embodied in today's young pilot. Airline recruiting and the different background and expectations of the warriors of today and the future are important factors which affect pilot retention rates. The author connects retention problems to Air Force leadership and suggests that senior leaders have become too remote from the front-line pilot. Restoring a link between the leaders and the led is something which is wholly in the hands of the military and it might have a positive effect on pilot retention; it would require no financial injection. Five courses of action are recommended.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Wing Commander Peter Harris graduated from the Royal Air Force College, Cranwell in 1970. He joined his first squadron in June 1972, flying Harriers in West Germany. Tours followed flying Harriers from England and Jaguars from West Germany. He then completed a tour of duty on exchange with the United States Navy flying A-7, A-4, and AV-8 aircraft at China Lake, California. In the Falklands War of 1982, he flew Harrier GR3s from HMS HERMES. From May 1985 to November 1987, he was Officer Commanding No IV (Army Co-operation) Squadron flying Harriers from RAF Gutersloh in West Germany. From November 1987 to July 1988, he was Officer Commanding Operations Wing and Deputy Station Commander at RAF Gutersloh. Wing Commander Harris is a graduate of the Air War College Class of 1989.

LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

This paper refers exclusively to the problem of pilot retention and connects it to Air Force leadership. It is not intended to convey the belief that it is only important to retain pilots, and that other branches--either officers or airmen--are less important and do not also suffer from retention problems. Pilot retention is used as an example solely for clarity, in the belief that strong leaders who work to reduce pilot wasteage would have a similar effect on retention problems experienced by other branches.

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INTRODUCTION

When assessing the cost of a Harrier GR3 accident, the Royal Air Force (RAF) Inspectorate of Flight Safety is required to allocate a price tag of approximately $3 1/2 million. Whilst this is less than the current cost of a replacement aircraft, for the purpose of this study it forms a useful basis for comparison with the training costs of a Harrier GR3 pilot which are currently assessed as approximately $5 1/2 million. (1:889) The accuracy of these figures is not the issue; what is important is the relationship between them which, allowing for a significant margin of error, indicates that the country's investment in the man is at least as great as its investment in the machine.

When an aircraft crashes, the RAF convenes a Board of Inquiry which is tasked, amongst other things, to ascertain the cause of the accident, allocate blame if necessary or appropriate, and to recommend corrective action in an attempt to prevent a similar accident from recurring. The Board of Inquiry procedure costs a considerable sum of money, but it is a prudent and cost-effective investment when compared to the price-tag of a modern warplane; major assets cannot be wastefully squandered in an era when the

economics of defence are under close and constant scrutiny. However, when a pilot elects to leave the RAF, there is no formal inquiry procedure, the causes for his decision to leave are not clearly established, no blame is allocated, and no attempt to prevent another pilot from leaving for the same reasons is made. A resource of at least equal value to an aircraft is lost and we do nothing.

Some manpower flow through the Air Force is clearly necessary to maintain balanced levels of experience and to ensure a satisfied work force; not everyone can rise to the top of the pyramid. However, it is in our national interests to retain the best pilots and officers at each rank level to get best value for the money spent both on training and on gaining experience, and to form a sound basis for promotion selection to the next rank so that the future leaders are absolutely the best available. From my recent experiences of three and a half years at RAF Gutersloh, a Harrier base in West Germany, too many of the quality pilots who display all of the attributes necessary for advancement are leaving at their option point, and too many of the bright young pilots enjoying their first operational tour have clearly no intention of remaining in the Service for a full career.

This paper analyzes some of the causes for the current situation, identifies a possible solution that lies

within the control of the military leadership, and recommends actions which should be taken to prevent the problem from becoming a crisis.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Numerous press articles have been published over the last two years which clearly state that despite the peaks and troughs experienced over the last decade, the current trend is towards increasing airline recruiting and decreasing military pilot retention through to the end of the century. According to an Aviation Week and Space Technology Report, in 1989, "The major airlines in the USA will hire more pilots than the US Air Force and US Navy graduate from flight school." (2:110)

Some press articles on the subject suggest that "what is happening in the USA (in the airline industry) will almost certainly be repeated in Europe." (1:890) Job availability for pilots outside the military is therefore improving and, empirically, a pilot who elects to leave the Air Force can now expect to be confronted by a situation whereby he selects the airline he wishes to work for rather than gratefully accepting the first job offer he receives. The environment is rapidly becoming one in which pilots, rather than job opportunities, are in short supply.

The loss of any officer who is rated as an above-average pilot and who receives a high recommendation for promotion to the next rank is a lost resource which can be ill-afforded in an era of escalating costs and a downward demographic curve.

THE BACKGROUND AND EXPECTATIONS OF TOMORROW'S PILOTS

Whilst the problem may not yet have reached crisis proportions, an analysis of the background and expectations of tomorrow's pilots is necessary to put the potential scale of the problem into perspective.

Because of the very strict medical and aptitude requirements necessary for selection into pilot training, the percentage of the national population suitable is surprisingly low and is estimated to be in the order of four to five percent. (1:889) The downward trend in the demographic curve will reduce the pool of potential pilots still further in the future and the recruiters will find themselves facing increasing competition not only from the airlines, but also from commercial enterprises which seek quality recruits with the initiative, self-confidence, and aspirations so necessary for a quality officer.

The pilots who will have to be recruited from this pool to join their first operational squadrons in the mid-90s are still at school. Squadron Leader Walker addresses this

point in an Air Clues article entitled, "Modern Aircraft, Man, and the Future" in which he states:

> "The non-graduate who joins his Eurofighter squadron in 1997 will have attended school from 1981 to 1994, a period in our history of remarkable change." (3:481)

The pilot of the 90's will remember World War II as the war in which his grandfather, or even great-grandfather, fought. He will have been born at about the time the Vietnam War ended and would have been at primary school when the Falklands War took place. His formative years will have been dominated by Thatcherism and a healthy economy rich in capitalism, and his impression of the world will be one of a place where, to use an oft-quoted saying, "peace is breaking out all over." With his policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, Mr. Gorbachev has transformed the public image of Europe's traditional foe in recent years from that of a grizzly bear bent on world domination to that of a peace-loving cuddly Koala.

To the highly ambitious, six-figure salaries are attainable and, if he wishes to live in his own house in the South of England where house prices have quadrupled in his lifetime, necessary; military salaries of this magnitude are most unlikely! His father will not have been required to do National Service (draft) and his upbringing will probably not have included any of the traditional military values of

discipline. By the end of the century, he will have completed two operational tours and he will be in a supervisory position. He will have had a chance to evaluate the military way of life, to enjoy its good points and to get frustrated by its bad points, and the military will have had the opportunity to assess him and to mould him into a junior officer with the potential to become a leader of the future. The task of retaining his commitment to the Service will be of the utmost importance to the leaders of the day.

This background picture is further coloured by an era when environmental acceptance of the military is on the wane and terrorism is increasingly having an adverse effect on military lifestyle; I will return to these two important points later.

CURRENT VIEWS OF PILOT RETENTION PROBLEMS

Today's operational junior pilot is not at the extreme depicted for tomorrow's pilot, but the trend is heading that way at increasing speed. The problems of pilot retention have long been acknowledged by the RAF and a wide range of studies has been conducted and many papers have been written. A paper written by Squadron Leader Robinson at the RAF Staff College in 1986, entitled "Disincentives--Cause of an Unacceptable Drain on our Most Precious Resource"

identified numerous disincentives which cause pilots to leave their profession. In particular, his paper stated that:

> "People leave any profession early because they are tempted by other jobs and/or are driven out by factors from within." (4:2)

Official studies into the problem culminated in "The Robson Study" in 1987. In this two-star led study, a team of four (three serving officers and a high ranking civil servant financial advisor) collated the views of the majority of the RAF Officer Corps and listed a wide-ranging number of complaints against Terms of Service and Conditions of Service. The Robson Study recommended, **inter alia**, that progress reports be issued periodically advising the Officer Corps of the progress or otherwise of implementation of the recommendations; this has been done both by special reports and by comment in the regular Officers' Bulletin which is issued semi-annually by the Air Secretary. Whilst many of the recommendations have been actioned, several have not for financial reasons or because they conflicted with Air Force Board policy.

THE LEADERSHIP CONNECTION

The Robinson paper states that:

> Too many air officers are seen by their juniors as remote, impersonal and indifferent; their attitudes seem out-of-date and they find it difficult to communicate with those they command. They lack the charisma of admirals or generals and seem impotent when pitted

> against politicians or civil servants. Too often their staff officers appear superior, unhelpful, self-motivated and over-eager to forget their operational experience. Unless they demonstrate loyalty to their subordinates, our leaders cannot expect loyal service from below. (4:11)

The Robson Study states that:

> Social change over the past 10 years has accelerated and in many areas the Service has simply failed to keep pace, or failed to explain why the RAF should remain different. The aspirations of many of our highly intelligent young officers are not being met, they are disillusioned and prepared to leave the Service rather than accept the situation. It is sadly clear that our leadership from group captain upwards does not now enjoy the same high degree of confidence and admiration of those below as was the case some years ago. (5:4)

During numerous conversations that I have had with high-calibre officers about to leave the Service, or high-calibre officers intent on leaving once they have accumulated the requisite number of flying hours for airline employment, this complaint about the remoteness of Air Force leaders has been a common thread. The statements in the Robinson paper and Robson Study confirm my belief that the single issue of leadership is a major issue in the debate on pilot retention; its resolution requires no financial injection and it is wholly in the hands of the military. It is of interest that the comment about the lack of regard in which senior leadership is held, which did not form the basis for a recommendation for change because it was outside the Robson Study's Terms of Reference, does not appear to merit comment in any

of the subsequent letters or bulletins which report on the progress of actions pursuant to the Study. (6, 7)

THE LEADERSHIP DISCONNECTION

An Army general is schooled in man-management from his first day as a subaltern. He has to deal with people at different rank-levels and from widely differing social backgrounds. He has to exercise command of people at every rank level--as a two-star divisional commander or three-star corps commander he is invariably co-located with his people. Even when he is in a non-command position, with the notable exception of a tour at the Ministry of Defence, he is never far from the rank and file of the Army. An admiral is quite literally in the same boat as his men. Again, even in the flag ranks, he is never far from the smell of the sea and the sailors he has to command.

For the air marshal, however, the situation is very different. As a junior officer, he would have been close to the ground crew, but would probably not have exercised command of them. The first opportunity a pilot has to exercise command is usually as a squadron commander and that is exactly the break point when career patterns remove him from flying stations and the fighting edge of the Air Force. Indeed, the normal pattern for a "high-flyer" destined for the highest ranks gives him one two and one half year (maxi-

mum) opportunity for command as a wing commander and one two year (maximum) command as a group captain. Prior to wing commander, command opportunities are few and far between, and after the rank of group captain, command is exercised from group or command headquarters which, in the RAF, are invariably remote from flying stations.

Intermediate staff officer tours are similarly conducted at the ubiquitous Ministry of Defence or at remote headquarters. Whilst many air officers make the effort to break away from the pressures of their office to visit their flying stations, these "flying" visits rarely make up for a lack of experience in "hands-on" man-management. The remoteness of the air marshal in the eyes of the junior officer has to some become a major influence in the decision-making process of whether to stay or to leave, because the disconnection between the junior officer and his senior leader is such that he can see no acceptable path (to him) between his lowly position and the lofty position of senior command.

In an Air Clues article entitled "Leadership," Air Vice-Marshal J.R. Walker acknowledges the risk of a gulf between "the leader and the led which can lower the credibility of the former and destroy the confidence of the latter." (8:373) The Robinson paper is more explicit:

> A flying-suited air officer in the crew-room, talking, laughing, listening and explaining, works wonders for the morale of those around him and, in time, for his entire command. (4:17)

Unfortunately, the sight is a rare one. Indeed, in a recent conversation that I had on this subject with a two-star RAF officer, he said that he believed that the disconnection between squadron pilot and the air ranks was total.

THE JUNIOR OFFICER'S VIEW

To understand fully the nature of the problem, it is necessary to view the status quo from the eyes of the junior officer. He is a dedicated professional military pilot who wants to be the best there is. The weapons systems he is required to master are becoming increasingly complex, as is the environment in which he is expected to be ready to employ his skills. He is, quite literally, the cutting edge of the Nation's forward defence.

However, environmental pressures are making his task of achieving professional excellence more difficult. Low-flying has been the RAF's doctrine to minimize the effectiveness of enemy air-defence systems for several decades. Prudent minimum low-flying heights have been imposed for environmental reasons and also to reduce low-flying accidents. The reasons for these limitations are clearly understood and readily accepted; they allow for realistic peacetime training

without prohibitive costs in terms of loss of life or aircraft, and they prevent excessive environmental discomfort. A pilot is normally authorized to fly not below the 250 feet or 500 feet minimum for the area over which he is flying, with occasional closely monitored exercises for more experienced pilots to operate not below 100 feet. Throughout training, until recently, a pilot was expected to fly at 250 feet or 500 feet--not below it, but not much above it either. There was, therefore, a Nelsonian blind eye applied to the inevitable minor excusion below the authorized height provided it was not a blatant breaking of the rules.

Over the last two years, the situation has changed. Public pressure against military low-flying, particularly in Germany, has resulted in policing of the skies by Skyguard, an anti-aircraft artillery target tracking radar. This provides an extremely accurate three-dimensional plot of aircraft position and can provide clear evidence of aircraft height over the ground; the photograph which accompanies the radar plot is sufficiently clear for the aircraft's registration number to be read. If the subject of this photographic evidence is below the minimum authorized height for the area, a copy of the photograph is sent to the appropriate headquarters for action.

For blatant--and dangerous--infringements of the regulations, this is obviously a boon to commanders who have to ensure that rules are sensibly adhered to. However, because no professional pilot wants to be called forward to explain an inadvertent infringement of the regulations, the net result has been an increase in low-flying heights to 350-400 feet in 250 feet areas and 700-800 feet in 500 feet areas; at these heights, the pilot feels he is no longer training realistically, and the commander's flexibility to "turn a blind eye" has been removed.

Since 1987, military low-flying over Germany has been banned for one hour over lunchtime during the summer months, and local pressure at some bases is applied to extend that ban to include all take-offs and landings over the lunch-time period. Additionally, in 1988, a civilian court injunction at one RAF base in Germany prevented that base from practising for air display flying which is a major motivating factor for the best junior pilots.

Further evidence of the increasing anti-military environment occurred in December last year, when NATO agreed to curtail military low-flying over Germany for three weeks in the aftermath of the unfortunate A-10 accident at Remscheid when German civilians were killed. Although the actual effect of the ban was minimal because of the number

of working days affected and the prevailing appalling European winter weather, the message was one of a continuing trend to limit the ability of a pilot to train realistically in peacetime. (9:1580) The young pilot striving for operational excellence feels that the rug is being pulled from under his feet.

To complicate the picture even more, it is necessary to superimpose the junior officer's perception of Air Force leadership on this murky picture. If a junior officer wishes to aspire to the higher ranks and make a full and successful career out of the military, he sees that he has to involve himself in desk-bound staff duties away from the aircraft he loves to fly, and he sees the grey amorphous headquarters as institutions run by people who are out of touch with what is going on at the front-line. Idealists who believe that the way to change all this is to get to the top and then change things from a position of power, see an establishment which appears to becoming increasingly powerless against politicians and environmentalists.

While he is going through these mental machinations, he is also living in an environment where the lifestyle of his family is being adversely affected by terrorism. As the Irish problem continues to be unresolved, the terrorists who wish to prosecute their fight in the public eye have turned

to the military as a source of "legitimate" targets whose destruction does not appear to evoke the same degree of public repugnance as do the indiscriminate bombings of civilians. As an example, in Germany in 1988, it was normal to make a detailed inspection of your car before getting into it whenever it had been parked in an insecure area, such as in the local town or even outside the numerous off-base married quarters. This affected wives and children on school runs or shopping trips more than it did the pilot, but domestic pressure and concerns for family safety add fuel to the fire.

In summary, the lifestyle in the military and the opportunity to achieve professional excellence is perceived to be on the decline, and the remoteness of the leadership does little to convince an individual to weather the storm when the opportunities for continued flying in the airlines, and domestic stability in civilian life offer an attractive alternative. The disconnection between the junior officer and senior leadership results in a gulf which seems to be too wide to cross.

EXPERT VIEWS OF LEADERSHIP

The rain forests of South America have suffered at the hands of innumerable authors who have written reams on the issues of leadership. Each author is an expert and each

expert has the answer to what is required of a leader. Yet none of them can provide the answer to what will make one man successful and another fail. Personality, charisma, and personal perception will all play their part. A review of some of the literature written on leadership supports my contention that an effective leader cannot be remote from the people he has to lead.

In his book Taking Charge, Major General Perry M. Smith states that leaders must be able to: ". . . walk with kings, and not lose the common touch." (10:188) This is a fundamental requirement for military leaders who have to be able to mix freely and effectively both with senior politicians and civil servants, and with the tools of their trade--young pilots.

In the book In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies, Lew Young, Editor-in-Chief of Business Week is quoted as saying:

> Probably the most important management fundamental that is being ignored today is staying close to the customer to satisfy his needs and anticipate his wants. In too many companies, the customer has become a bloody nuisance whose unpredictable behavior damages carefully made strategic plans, whose activities mess up computer operations, and who stubbornly insists that purchased products should work. (11:156)

Although in the Air Force we do not have customers to deal with in the same sense as do businesses, Lew Young's quote remains valid for air force leaders if the young pilot is

transposed as the customer. That is not to say that the Air Force should become a soft establishment which panders to every whim of the young pilot. There is nothing wrong with an autocratic leader in a democratic society, and military forces exist to defend democracy, not to practise it. However, totally ignoring the feelings of the young pilots or even worse, not knowing what they are, would be an expensive mistake.

In his Air Clues article on leadership, Air Vice-Marshal J. R. Walker states that: "The modern fighting man will not willingly follow a fool--nor should the system require him to do so." (8:378) He asks for:

1. Someone who is professionally competent. Someone who knows his business and who has at some time in his career demonstrated his competence.

2. A people man. He is not asking for cuddlesome softies: a commander's primary responsibility to his men is to ensure that by hard and realistic preparations, they have the maximum chance of winning--and thereby living--though any conflict.

3. A leader with a wholehearted belief in the cause.

4. A winner.

He concludes his article with the question:

> How do you find these leaders? What is that indeterminable factor, the intangible, the unknown which makes one man a manager and the other a leader? I believe T. E. Lawrence's comments on tactics can be applied equally to the matter of leadership. And how well he put it when he said that: "Nine-tenths of tactics are certain and taught in books, but the irrational tenth is like the Kingfisher flashing across the pool, and that is the test of Generals. (8:378)

RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION

The first thing military leaders must do is to acknowledge that a problem exists; the evidence is there--it appeared in the Robson Study. However, just as an alcoholic cannot start on a course of rehabilitation until he accepts that he is an alcoholic, neither can leadership issues be resolved until the disconnection that exists between the young pilot and his senior leaders is accepted as a problem by the current leaders; and just like alcoholism, the longer the complaint remains untreated, the harder it is to correct.

Secondly, military leaders must fight hard for--and just as importantly, be seen to fight hard for--realistic peacetime training. No warrior worthy of the title can be expected to accept that he may have to fight in an environment in which he has not been allowed to train in peace.

Thirdly, the annual assessment of an officer's leadership qualities should be expanded and should reflect whether it is an objective assessment of an officer who is

actually in command of people, or whether it is a subjective assessment of leadership potential. Additionally, the assessment of an officer's leadership qualities merits more than the current one-line entry in the numerical grading portion of the annual confidential report, where it competes with such headings as "Social Attributes" and "Power of Written Expression."

Fourth, a procedure should be established to ascertain the reasons why a pilot makes a decision to retire early. There was a general feeling that a surfeit of studies and surveys into the problems of pilot retention had been carried out and the Robson Study was declared to be the ultimate study from which action would follow; this indeed has happened. However, in a fluid world which changes constantly, the primary cause for pilots retiring will also change. Surveys of serving pilots are not the only answer to keep abreast of this dynamic situation. Just as a Board of Inquiry is convened to investigate an aircraft accident, so an inquiry should be held to investigate the reasons for the retirement of any officer who is designated as having the potential for promotion to at least two ranks higher (an assessment which is made currently on an officer's confidential report). Such an inquiry would not prevent the loss of that officer, but it would highlight the common causes

for dissatisfaction and it would keep management current with changing trends. It would also generate statistics which could be used to support changes to conditions or terms of service which may be resisted by politicians or civil servants.

Finally, career patterns for future Air Force leaders should ensure that the major emphasis is placed on full command tours. The time in actual command is regrettably short in the Air Force and it is wrong to shorten those tours further because a "high flyer" has achieved a "tick in the box" and must move on to achieve the next "tick in the box" so that the personnel management requirements can be met in time to ensure early promotion to the next rank. Any organization has a momentum of its own, and an individual's effectiveness in command can only be adequately tested if he is there long enough to impose his own character and style on that organization.

CONCLUSION

A recent speaker at the Air War College divided pilots into the three categories of wimps, yuppies, and warriors. He declared that he did not want the wimps and yuppies; they could leave, and I agree with him. What he wanted was the warrior and I agree with that too. However, if a warrior is to be led effectively, then he must respect

his leader and hold him in high regard. That respect must be earned by strong leadership and not expected by virtue of rank or position alone.

The task of re-establishing the links between senior leaders and the young pilot is totally within the control of the Air Force. Only by making the job of senior military leadership something that high-grade young officers aspire to will the Service be able to stem the flow of hard-won and well-trained quality assets out into the soft green grass of civilian life.

Hopefully, if the armed services of the free world do their job, and if the politicians can forget Clausewitz's claim that "war is an extension of politics," then there will be no armed conflict which involves the RAF for the next decade. However, the new "Cold War" will be an internal national struggle to retain our valuable warrior assets and to prevent them from becoming disillusioned. This requires strong leadership and credible leadership. The wherewithal for winning this new form of war lies squarely in the hands of today's leaders who must first recognize that a gulf exists between the leaders and the led. It is then essential to the health of the Air Force to bridge that gap so that the best of tomorrow's warriors aspire to become the next century's air marshals.

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